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THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE OLD SOUTH

WILLIAM E. DODD
University of Chicago

The American revolution was a social revolution in the South, especially in Virginia, where great landed estates and the established church were broken down. The adoption of the federal Constitution was a recovery from the radicalism which underlay the Declaration of Independence and which forced the revolt against England in spite of the doubts and warnings of sober heads and great slaveholders. Still the majority of the people of the old South were democratic, and Jefferson was for many years their ideal political and social philosopher; and the planters retained with much difficulty the dominant position in society which constitutions and privileged wealth gave them.

But the practices of life and daily business so belied the profession of democracy, and the development of the cotton industry gave such power to the owners of slave labor, that a restatement of the social theory became pressing about the time that Garrison compelled the North to think of the dangers of an ever-encroaching slave power upon the institutions of the country as a whole. In the Virginia constitutional convention of 1829, the North Carolina convention of 1835, and the South Carolina discussion of nullification during the same period the abler men of the South definitely abandoned the doctrine of democracy. John Marshall, John Randolph, Judge Gaston, of North Carolina, and Calhoun and McDuffie, of South Carolina, were perhaps the best spokesmen of the political group which led this reaction. Webster and Chancellor Kent reflected a similar faith in New England and New York.

The problem in the South was so to state the common belief that people would settle down to a quiet acceptance of slavery and a stratified social and economic organization that poor men, even when they were in the majority, would be contented, and that

insurrections on the part of slaves would be easily suppressed. To do this, slavery must be shown to be a good thing of itself and the results of slavery highly beneficial to society. Heavy work must be done. Who could better do it than the negro? Someone must guide and manage public affairs. Who could do that so well as the master of great plantations? If the slave did the rough work and the master managed the state, common men with farms and shops would probably vote and fight in the event of war. In return for the privilege of running the state the master might be induced to meet the main burden of taxation.

But that was not democracy. Jefferson and his great declaration would quickly be discarded in such an arrangement, an arrangement in which all men had distinct places, all men owed obligations, and none might complain that they had no employment. It was plain that democracy could not exist in the presence of great fortunes in slaves and lands, and the owners of these recognized the truth of the situation. They only needed a great teacher or group of teachers to make the new-old faith of social articulation popular. They found such a teacher at William and Mary College, Professor Thomas R. Dew, who was giving lectures on political and social science to increasing numbers of students.

Dew was a careful student who had spent years in Germany, where the new state philosophy of Fichte and Hegel was coming into vogue, where men were taught that duties and not rights were the fit subjects for emphasis. Whether or not the Virginia student was greatly influenced by his German masters I cannot say. But he returned to his native country and offered the South a new philosophy. In his testimony before a legislative committee appointed to take the opinions of the best-informed citizens, he reviewed briefly the history of the world and showed that slavery had been and still was the normal condition of most men, that all the great accumulations of property had been the result of slavery, and that civilization was the result of property.

This was true of ancient Rome as of modern Britain, where hundreds of thousands of expert industrial workers were but the slaves of their employers, and where the returns of labor were only sufficient to feed and clothe the laborer and rear one or two workers

to take his place at death. The iron law of wages, of which so much was made later by Karl Marx, was clearly stated in Dew's testimony. It was a cruel, bitter fact that men were not free, nor could the majority ever be free. Without tears or the affectation of tears he then showed that art, literature, science, architecture, beautiful women, and gentlemen of leisure all depend upon the forced labor of masses of ignorant men whom to make free would be a social crime.

All the teachings of the great Jefferson were dismissed with a contemptuous remark: "Glittering fallacies." It had been a long time since Virginians of political aspirations had talked like that. In addition to this destructive criticism Dew showed that slavery was perhaps as great a source of revenue for Virginia as was the tobacco industry. By an analysis of the census returns and examination of the custom-house records that statement could be fairly supported. The surplus negro population did go south, and the price of slaves, particularly Virginia slaves, was high and rising with the passing of every decade.

If freedom was impossible and slavery the natural portion of most men, if slavery was profitable and the only guaranty of an increasing culture, why should Virginians make further ado about its abolition? Dew confirmed them in the negative response to this query by showing that the Bible and the Christian church sustained slavery. Few greater blows have ever struck at democracy in the United States than this argument of an able and trusted teacher and scientist. The Virginians, at the point of beginning a policy of emancipation, turned their backs upon democracy and henceforth discounted their great historical leader. They accepted a new social faith, which, as they said, was more consistent with the facts of life.

From this starting-point it was easy to formulate the new doctrine. Not all men should vote, but only those who owned property; not all men should be educated at public expense, but only those whose life and business required education and training. Hard labor was for those whose hands were hard, mainly for black hands. Superintendence and guidance were the work of white men. In matters of government only the trained and the thoughtful

should have actual part. There were to be gradations in society, gentlemen and ladies, middle-class artisans, honest farmers, and slaves. How lucky that the hardest toil might be done by negroes. England and New England were compelled to put good white hands to the rougher tasks of life!

When Virginia took the backward way, as some have been wont to say, South Carolina rejoiced, for she had already started upon that career. None of her sons, however, had formulated the new doctrine so well as Dew. Now Chancellor Harper, one of the clean and upright men in public life, restated and supplemented the philosophy of the Virginian. In Harper's *Memoir on Slavery*¹ we find the hard facts stated as follows:

The exclusive owners of property ever have been, ever will, and perhaps ever ought to be the virtual rulers of mankind. . . . It is the order of nature and of God that the being of superior faculties and knowledge, and therefore of superior power, should control and dispose of those who are inferior. It is as much in the order of nature that men should enslave each other as that animals should prey upon each other.

This was written in 1837. It was published from time to time afterward till the outbreak of the Civil War. It is significant that it has never been reprinted in the South since 1860. Harper continues his harsh but logical treatise:

To constitute a society a variety of offices must be discharged, from those requiring the very lowest degree of intellectual power to those requiring the very highest. It should seem that the endowments ought to be apportioned according to the exigencies of the situation. And the first want of society is leaders. The first care of a state which regards its own safety, prosperity, and honor should be that when minds of extraordinary power appear, to whatever department of knowledge, art, or science their exertions may be directed, the means should be provided of their most consummate cultivation. . . .

Odium has been cast upon our legislation on account of its forbidding the elements of education to be communicated to slaves. But, in truth, what injury is done to them by this? He who works during the day with his hands does not read in the intervals of his leisure for his amusement or the improvement of his mind. If there were any chance of their elevating their rank and condition in society, it might be a matter of hardship that they should be denied those rudiments of knowledge which open the way to further attainments.

¹ Most accessible in *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (Charleston, 1852), a work which contains Dew's writings on the same subject.

Thus, not only is the lowest in society not to be trained to any other than the hardest toil, but its members are necessarily on a low moral scale: "A slave has no hope that by a course of integrity he can materially elevate his condition in society, nor can his offense against honesty materially depress it, or affect his means of support or that of his family. Compared with the freeman he has no character to establish or lose." It was not different in the relations of the sexes:

In northern communities the unmarried woman who becomes a mother is an outcast from society. She has given birth to a human being who is commonly educated to a course of vice, depravity, and crime. It is not so with the female slave. She is not a less useful member of society than before. She has not impaired her means of support nor materially impaired her character or lowered her station. She has done no great injury to herself or to any other human being. Her offspring is not a burden, but an acquisition, to her owner. The want of chastity among slaves hardly deserves a harsher name than weakness.

The chasm between this lowest class of society and the masters who are at the top is so great that none can hope to bridge it. There is, to be sure, a freeman, or intermediate, class from which the truly noble are recruited and which furnishes the connecting link between the field hand and the gentleman. Men of this group are to fill the places of overseers, merchants, mechanics, engineers, physicians, teachers, lawyers, and preachers. They are those who shall be educated at the expense of society, who shall have the right to vote and to bear arms, and who shall be made to feel the pride of race and color and appreciate the benefits of a caste system. And thus Harper comes, like Dew, to repudiate the doctrines of the great Virginia statesman and philosopher, whose name and ideals must not, however, be mentioned too flippantly. It must be shown that it is only in the cause of truth and research that one repudiates the Declaration of Independence.

Harper is undoubtedly scientific in spirit. In reference to Jefferson's ideal of life he says: "Is it not palpably nearer the truth to say that no man was ever born free and that no two men were ever born equal, than to say that all men are born free and equal? Man is born to subjection. . . . The proclivity of the natural man is to domineer or to be subservient." It is through

the evolution of men in society that each man or class of men comes to find its proper place and level. And society then crystallizes and legalizes the differences and guarantees to men the privileges that have been usurped. This is the very condition of civilization, and laws are made to prevent revolts as well as to render the different classes contented and even ignorant. For, "if there are sordid, servile, and laborious offices to be performed, is it not better that there should be sordid, servile, and laborious beings to perform them?"

That a comparatively young and half-frontier community would readily adopt such a social system as Harper sketched could not be expected. There would be disorders, insurrections from within, and attacks from without, although slavery, according to our author, tended to peace and order. The older and more densely populated a slavery community became the more contented and orderly it would become, for all hope of freedom for the slaves would be abandoned and others would find their proper level. Still, to meet all contingencies and to secure the objects he had in view, he declared that a standing army must be created and maintained. In the South this would be easy because the honor of defending one's country would be allowed only to white men, slaves being a last possible resort in dire danger. If the honor were properly appraised, there would be developed a spirit of patriotism and emulation which must have the best effect.

In the South, "like ancient Athens, it will be necessary that every citizen should be a soldier. . . . And perhaps a wise foresight should induce our state to provide that it should have within itself such military knowledge and skill as may be sufficient to organize, discipline, and command armies, by establishing a military academy or school of discipline."¹

It is hardly necessary to develop the ideas of Dew and Harper further. They laid their foundations carefully and boldly. Neither of them spoke the language of the politician. They spoke as wise men, giving counsel to their fellows and outlining the forms of a state and the duties of statesmen according to the requirements

¹ Such academies were established and maintained in Virginia, South Carolina, and other states during the decade just preceding the Civil War.

of the conditions around them. It was not unlike Fichte and the earlier German philosophers giving rationalist directions to their contemporaries. If these southern teachers of a new school found acceptance with the mass of articulate men, there were to be no more apologetics about slavery, and no more talk about freedom and equality.

And widespread acceptance was readily found. In 1837 the greatest and sincerest of all southern statesmen, Calhoun, openly declared that he held slavery to be a blessing and that southerners should cease to apologize for it. And he added that "there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not in point of fact live on the labor of the other."¹ This might at other times have been taken as a thrust at the captains of industry of the East, who were getting the better of him in national law-making. But in 1837 Calhoun had, like so many other southerners of the old Jeffersonian school, changed his mind. He meant what he said; and his support of the new teachings was worth that of a regiment of other and less trusted leaders. He now believed in the caste system, of which slavery was, in the South, the mainstay. To complete the break with the past Calhoun later said: "Nothing can be more unfounded and false than the opinion that all men are born free and equal; inequality is indispensable to progress; government is not the result of compact, nor is it safe to entrust the suffrage to all."²

If men of this mold accepted the new social philosophy, it was not difficult for men of lesser caliber to follow suit, or for the great majority of planters to accept the new faith. In South Carolina nearly every leader, whether in politics, religion, or business life, espoused the cause, and many made effort to reply in positive terms to all who condemned the institutions of the South. Macaulay, Dickens, Mrs. Trollope, and Harriet Martineau were answered with the statement that modern industrialism was worse than slavery. James H. Hammond, a moderate but popular follower of Calhoun, published a series of letters in 1845 attacking England and New England for the cruelties of their industrial life. It was

¹ Richard K. Cralle, *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, II (New York, 1853-56), 630.

² *Ibid.*, I, 8, 12, 46-58.

a heartrending picture which he drew. He was not answered successfully, for his statements were drawn from irrefutable evidence. Southerners took much credit to themselves that their system was not so heartless as that of their opponents. They did take care of the children of slaves; they employed physicians for the sick and provided some sort of support for the aged and disabled workers; there was a sort of comradeship between master and slave which blunted the edge of servitude.

Dew had ventured the opinion that negro slaves were the happiest of southerners. Hammond urged that "our patriarchal scheme awakens the higher and finer feelings of our nature. It is not wanting in its enthusiasm and its poetry." William Gilmore Simms, of South Carolina, author of as many books as Scott himself, lent all the weight of his name to the thesis that the negroes of the South were the happiest laborers in the world. William L. Yancey, of Alabama, made the new social philosophy and its system of servitude the subject of his incomparable oratory. Henry S. Foote, Jefferson Davis, John Slidell, and all other important public men of the South became ardent advocates of the faith.

For men who were beginning to think as these men of the South were thinking, Walter Scott's famous novels could not fail to be significant. I believe that it was the head of the house of Harper in New York who said a few years before the war that he shipped Scott's writings to the South in carload lots. *The Lady of the Lake*, *Waverly*, and the *Fair Maid of Perth* reflected the old ideals of fine lords and fair ladies which southerners now set themselves to imitate and reflect. Scott's gentle folk talked and acted in lofty fashion, while his poor and ill-placed people were rough and brutal, without refined feelings and half ready to accept as their just portion the kicks or cuffs of their betters. The money grubber, too, always appeared in an unlovely rôle, thus reminding southerners of "Yankee" financiers and commercial swindlers. Scott was not the cause of the Civil War, but he probably contributed as much to its southern purpose as any other except perhaps Calhoun.

Not only Scott and Scott's incurable snobbery worked upon the southern psychology, but that other Scotchman, Thomas Carlyle, added his mite—no small mite either. Carlyle went

roughly but directly to the point: Would you turn out poor slaves, like horses, to graze? Then why all this prattle about abolition? Every man is created either to work or think. The menial task is for the menial mind; the higher work for the superior being. God has given mankind heroes for great undertakings like government. It is the business of common men to labor and say nothing, even sing as they toil. Such was the language and the philosophy which the rough old barbarian put forth in countless books about the middle of the nineteenth century. Was that not the very language of Dew and Harper and the rest? Carlyle was not without his share of the responsibility for the American Civil War, as he was not without great influence in the making of modern Prussia, with its creed of force, power, and supermen.

The social philosophy of the South certainly was not without good ancestry, and its growth was both rapid and sturdy. George Fitzhugh, of Virginia, rounded out the teachings of his predecessors and made the applications suggested by Scott and Carlyle. In *Sociology for the South*, published in 1854, he outlines his social structure, a plan which he regarded as applicable to the South and which, once it were really put into practice in good faith, must appeal to the rest of the world. Restating the caste system of Dew and Harper, he demolishes Adam Smith with all the zest of a modern sociologist. Having prepared his foundations by clearing away the rubbish of *laissez-faireism*, he rests the new structure upon the inequality of men both in law and in economics. Society must be organized for positive purposes, he contends; men must be restrained, governed, and subjected to discipline; and states must take care that every man, woman, and child shall have his due place and a suitable support. The idle must be compelled to work, although one must not mistake mental occupation for idleness. Some work in the fields, some in the shops, some in their studies, and the greatest in the halls of legislation. It follows that freedom of movement of trade or of industry is impossible; social efficiency and economic success in a world of reality demand organization.

Of course organization connotes slavery for the ignorant and the unfortunate. But as most men are born to slavery, the new state

could only improve the slave's lot, for the masters would become responsible to the state and the state to the slave, whose work is the very basis of all social life. In England the industrial leader should become the owner of his labor and be compelled to feed and clothe all his workers; in New England men must be compelled to silence about freedom and emancipation, and the owners of property must be forced to take care of the workers as they were doing in the South; in the great West the public lands should be held by the federal government till large estates could be established with masters to control them and landless people should be bound to the soil in the fashion of the Middle Ages. In this way only could the increasing hordes of immigrants from Europe and the multiplying natives be provided for and rendered harmless. Thus the United States would become a social model for the world.

In this new order the southerners would undoubtedly get the better part, for they would have black men to do their heavy work. White men could always be granted a somewhat privileged position. They could safely be educated, trained to useful callings, and have the highest honors held out to them as possibilities. In the North white men must be subjected and held to low and menial tasks, which would be unfortunate, though not worse than it was in England or Germany. Social order would be more difficult to maintain in the North, but with a happy and contented South in the same common government there would be no real danger, for southerners would come to the aid of their endangered economic brethren of New England or the West.

But it was necessary first to make the country aware of the state of things. "Slavery will everywhere be abolished or everywhere reinstated." That was his logical imperative, just as it was Lincoln's premise four years later in the debates with Douglas. Fitzhugh did not dream that it could be abolished, and consequently the other alternative must be taken. What an ideal society was at hand! It only required positive law in some places and recognition of the beneficence of laws then thought to be cruel in others to bring about the millennium.

With this ideal state duly propped and bolstered with laws of primogeniture and entail, with kindly but firm administration of

the black codes, and with the real truths of Christianity generally accepted, the new civilization would soon prove its worth, and all the world would be reformed along lines suggested by the facts of life, not by the half-baked theories of Jefferson and his kind. In the new system property would be the base of all things. Its owners would pay all the taxes and receive all the honors and emoluments. There could be no poverty, for the poor would be the property of the well-to-do; there could be but little crime, for there would be no motive to crime. A man who is not free cannot steal; a horse cannot commit crime. Nor would there be the great expense of hospitals for the insane. Insanity is the result of poverty. Having abolished poverty, insanity must disappear too. Of course there might now and then be a gentleman whose love affairs made him mad like Hamlet; but such a one would be taken care of by his family.

Finally, if the system were duly organized throughout the world, the South leading, there would be no more wars, for God would preside over all, the interests of men who owned property would everywhere be identical, and nations would not be disposed to rob each other. Thus we see that in the completed social state of Fitzhugh, as in the democracy of Jefferson, universal peace was to be the goal. This last, or the international phase of the doctrine, was not fully described; but this was recognized as the end. Christianity would everywhere prevail, and if Christianity prevailed there could be no wars. But it was not to be the Christianity of Jesus—just organized Christianity.

While this book of Fitzhugh's did not receive the acclaim that similar writings then received in Germany, it was accepted in the South without protest save in negligible circles. The reviews were all favorable. Some of its weaker spots were pointed out and some moderation of language was recommended, for example, by the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the one standard of the South. The author was lionized; he lectured in New England—all successful authors must lecture in New England; and he became a friend and correspondent of Carlyle. Emerson, often on the fence in social ideals, held aloof.

Under the influence of these and other writers of the same general school the South came to adopt a social philosophy wonderfully like that of Germany. Only in the South war was not hailed as the great rejuvenator of peoples, and force was not idolized. It was more humane, although not different in principle; and in the South there was almost universal acceptance as we find to be the case in Germany. Every newspaper of every state, so far as I have been able to check them, accepted the ideal. Inequality became the natural order; slavery was accepted as a blessing from heaven; and masters of plantations became the supermen from whom ideas and good reasoning were confidently expected.

In coming to this view the southern leaders had returned to their study of the ancients, as many another reformer has done, as the classicists in our universities would have us do now. The Bible, the Greek philosophers, and the conduct of the early Christians were the models and sources of thought and good sense. Had not the ancients sounded the depths and scaled the heights of all wisdom? And were not the flimsy works of the French revolutionists and their successors only passing whims? None could say them nay; and a great part of the world, including the ablest Englishmen and the best German philosophers, had already set their faces toward the truth. What better buttressing could southerners desire? It was a sort of revival of classical learning, this strange reaction of a democratic people. It proved to be a deep-seated movement, as the Civil War was to show beyond a peradventure. The southerner fought for his ideal quite as valiantly as have any of the soldiers on the Western Front of our day.